Transitions: Woman's Search for Meaning

by Ann Daly, Ph.D.

Q: I am a woman with core values that include creativity, community and spirituality. I want these values to be reflected in my life and work. What can I do to make sure that my career choices are in line with my core values? — Melanie

A: You may think that you have asked a simple, personal question, Melanie, but I think that you have actually reframed the entire "work-life balance" conversation by articulating two key points. First, it's not about making tradeoffs, it's about *defining core values*. Second, it's not about managing time, it's about *making choices*.

You are in an excellent position to fulfill your desire for a meaningful life, because you have already answered the essential question: "What are my core values?"

The answer to your larger question is simple, if not easy: Every moment of every day, with every choice you must or can make, both large and small, you must say "yes" only to those employers, partners, initiatives, projects, assignments, commitments and opportunities that align with your core values.

That's it: your life, your values, your choices.

But here's where the rubber meets the road. Making these choices is not always so clear-cut. What if "no" also means a reduced income for the kids' college fund? What if "no" also means losing a promotion? What if "no" also means hurting someone's feelings?

These are the choices that test the strength of your core values. If you find yourself routinely making choices in apparent conflict with your core values, then you need to consider that your actions are speaking louder than your words. Those may not be your core values, after all.

Making the commitment to align your career choices with your core values requires that you get clear about two more things: risk and investment. How much risk (lifestyle, status, relationships, time, income) are you willing to take in service of your core values? How much investment (time, spirit, money, attention) are you willing to make?

Melanie's question reminds me of my friend Georgia Duke. I knew she was something special when she closed the sale on my first home. She answered every one of my many, many questions with care and respect, and, maybe even more importantly, she served cookies. We really bonded when she, a Kilgore native who grew up as an aspiring Rangerette, discovered that I wrote a book about Isadora Duncan.

Georgia started out as a secretary back in the day when "women didn't." Women didn't close real estate transactions. Women didn't get loans without a man's co-signature. Women certainly didn't start businesses.

Maybe women didn't, but Georgia did.

She founded Texas Professional Title, Inc. in 1983 with three female partners. She intentionally built the company around her core values: loyalty, perseverance and conviction. Even when she risked losing a client.

If a client threatened to pull business when Georgia refused a request that didn't align with her business practices, so be it. She was sorry to see them go. Even in the early years, that was a risk she was willing to take in service of her values.

Georgia spent 27 years as an employee before becoming the boss.

"One of the main reasons I started my own business was because I wanted to reward the employees with a small bonus twice a year. Once in the summer so they could take a vacation and then again at Christmas so they could buy presents for their family and kids. But I was told, 'You can't treat employees that well. They'll take advantage of you.'"

By starting her own company, Georgia was able to completely live her commitment to loyalty. "I decided that I would treat my employees the way I had wanted to be treated. I implemented "Christmas in July" bonuses as well as Christmas bonuses. Down the line I initiated an Employee Stock Option Ownership Plan, which gave 30% of the ownership of the company to all of the employees. It was an absolute win-win situation for everyone!!"

Building a meaningful career requires a lot of courage, discipline and persistence. For Georgia, the risk and investment paid off. She ultimately created the kind of company she originally envisioned and sold it in 2000 to North American Title Company, where she remains in charge as Austin Division President. Just recently she was honored as a "Woman Pioneer of the Title Industry" by the Texas Land Title Association.

"In the long run it was worth it," she says, "but 'ignorance is bliss.' If I had known everything it entailed, I may have just stayed curled up in bed."

Any final advice? "Stick to your core values and don't ever be swayed."

© 2008 Ann Daly

Ann Daly PhD (www.anndaly.com) is a life coach, speaker, and author of *A Year of Clarity: The Monthly Guide for Women*. She helps professional women get clear about what they want and how to get it. Subscribe to her free online eletter at: www.anndaly.com/eletter.